

## **Fandom at the crossroads and Fangasm!, by Lynn S. Zubernis and Katherine Lars**

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### **Transformative Works and Cultures**

DOI:

[10.3983/twc.2016.0710](https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2016.0710)

Published: 01/01/2016

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

*Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):*

Fathallah, J. (2016). Fandom at the crossroads and Fangasm!, by Lynn S. Zubernis and Katherine Lars. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 21. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2016.0710>

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## Book review

### ***Fandom at the crossroads and Fangasm!*, by Lynn S. Zubernis and Katherine Larsen**

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[0.1] Keywords—Fan community; Fan fiction; *Supernatural*; Television

Fathallah, Judith May. 2016. *Fandom at the Crossroads and Fangasm!*, by Lynn S. Zubernis and Katherine Larsen [book review]. In "The Classical Canon and/as Transformative Work," edited by Ika Willis, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2016.0710>.

**Lynn S. Zubernis and Katherine Larsen. *Fandom at the crossroads: Celebration, shame and fan/producer relationships*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, hardcover, \$67.99 (250p) ISBN 978-1443835305; paperback, \$24.99 (259p) ISBN 978-1443841405.**

**Lynn S. Zubernis and Katherine Larsen. *Fangasm! Supernatural fangirls*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013, paperback \$14.67 (246p) ISBN 978-1609381981; e-book \$17.48 (6732 KB) ASIN B00F5S6I1K.**

[1] Out of the messy dual experience of being both fans and academics, Kathy Larsen and Lynn Zubernis hoped to produce one hybrid text that would fuse their fannish and academic identities. The hypothetical book would not compromise either on the emotional aspect of the authors' fannish investment or on the critical/analytic stance of the academic in fan studies. This task proved impossible and the authors grappled continuously with the difficulties of speaking as fans to academics and to academics as fans. *Fandom at the Crossroads* and *Fangasm* are the two books that eventually emerged from their struggle. Neither, as the authors are first to admit, is the idealized hybrid text that would destroy the false dichotomies of academic/fan, reason/emotion, and pleasure/business once and for all, yet both go a good way toward breaking down those boundaries from both the academic and fannish perspectives.

[2] *Fangasm* is primarily a book by fans speaking to fans even as Lynn and Kathy, as they refer to themselves, struggle to legitimate themselves both in fandom and with the cast and crew members that they interview. In their physical and emotional journey through fandom, they juggle their academic credentials, work responsibilities, and home lives with a deep, irrational, and shame-inducing love for the cult television show *Supernatural* (2005–) and its cast. *Fangasm's* chapters are organized around the authors' experiences and events that took place on their journeys from attending fan conventions to uncomfortable run-ins with security staff. After the book's prologue—in which the authors first appear in the third person as two ardent fans on their first road trip to Comic Con—Chapter 1, "Falling Down the Rabbit Hole," relates their discovery of and instant obsession with *Supernatural*, and it also introduces some basic theory on fan psychology from a nonpathologizing perspective. This contribution should be

valuable to fan readers unfamiliar with the literature who seek explanations for and identification with their emotional investments that are neither shaming nor moralizing.

[3] Shame is a running theme throughout later chapters of *Fangasm*, narrating the progression of the authors' involvement in fandom from attending cons and participating online to visiting sets and interviewing cast and crew. The authors relate a brief endorsement of their research from The Powers That Be (TPTB) behind *Supernatural* and an offer from the studios to publish their work, experiences that temporarily imbue them with the sense of legitimacy that they have craved for their work. That endorsement is abruptly pulled once said TPTB realize that their interests are more in fan fic, slash, and female desire and community than in simply promoting the show. Relatedly, there is a valuable discussion of how culture instills shame in women for desire, sexuality, and pleasure, yet the authors may overgeneralize this as integral to fannish experience. While the authors experience significant personal cost in terms of lost friendships and family tensions as they pursue their fannish pleasures, they perhaps generalize a little too freely about the price we pay for fandom. Who are the we for whom the authors speak? Indeed, the central weakness of *Fangasm* may be that it speaks to and for a quite specific subset of fandom yet gives the impression that it discusses fandom as a whole.

[4] Community divisions, hierarchies, and jealousy in fandom are also explored, especially as the authors' status as academics begins to grant them coveted access to the shows' stars and production personnel. They become increasingly unhappily aware that their positions are beginning to incur jealousy, divisions, and ill feeling in a community that they had formerly perceived as harmonious and unified. Fannish community is discussed in conjunction with some psychological literature on niche seeking and identity construction through media in the contemporary world. Again, this is a valuable contribution for fans seeking an introduction to the psychology of fandom and a strong addition to the sparse literature on fandom from the perspective of normal psychology rather than pathology. The book concludes with a series of interviews with *Supernatural* cast and crew, primarily addressing their perception of and relation to fandom. Far from the fears that some fans may harbor of being perceived as insane, excessive, or deviant by their objects of desire, cast and crew are presented as appreciative, accommodating, and unperturbed by their fans. However, it should be noted that Larsen and Zubernis take their interviewees' statements rather at face value—some appreciation and discussion of the fact that cast and crew are participants in a discursive construction on which their jobs ultimately depend, and that they were aware that they were speaking to researchers for publication, would have added a useful lens to these chapters. This omission may be a result of the authors' own position as fans or a requirement of publication for a primarily fannish audience. Yet even nonacademic fans are not generally naïve regarding contexts of production, and some exploration of the political economy in which both researchers and informants were acting would have been useful.

[5] Where *Fangasm's* chapters are structured around places, events, and experiences, *Fandom at the Crossroads'* chapters reference current topics and theories in fan studies. This book opens with a literature review and concludes with a bibliography, both structural requirements of an academic work speaking to fellow academics. Yet the personal voices of Larsen and Zubernis (still Kathy and Lynn in the text) are not lost. In Chapter 2, "Business or Pleasure," they review work on the problematic double position of researcher and fan and explore their own place within that position. Much of the material in *Fandom at the Crossroads* is quite similar to that of *Fangasm*. Both include exploration of the hierarchized spaces and places of fandom (Chapter 1, "Lost in Space: Participatory Fandom and the Negotiation of Fan Spaces"); of women's negotiation of shame and pleasure (Chapter 3, "I'm Too Sexy for My Stereotype"); and of niche seeking and community. *Fandom at the Crossroads* addresses the topics in more explicit discussion with academic work. The researchers' position as authors is slightly more formal here yet still valuably reflexive—they explicitly discuss, for instance, how assuming an academic position reduces shame through downplaying emotion and sex, devalued categories in our society and doubly so for women.

[6] Chapter 4 discusses fandom as a transformative agent of change, less socially than from a psychological intrapersonal perspective, integrating literature on writing as therapeutic self-expression and narrative therapy with discussion of fan fic and interviews with its authors. This is another important contribution to a less-discussed aspect of fan fic in academia: fan fic and its kinks and tropes as self-discovery, self-empowerment, and a working through

of trauma rather than as an explicitly political agent of change in the media industries. However, the lack of a clear methodology to the selection and of analysis of interviews and statements is problematic. The authors admit that they kept their researcher-identities off LiveJournal and presented only as fans. Does this mean that the information was covertly gathered? Is this the case with the quotations taken and anonymized from a locked community (Chapter 5, "Only Love Can Break Your Heart: Fandom Wank and Policing the Safe Space")? If not, how were the fan participants recruited and selected? Indeed, the lack of a clear methodology and justification for the selection and presentation of material is the primary weakness of *Fandom at the Crossroads*. Without this, at times it runs the risk of slipping into the impressionistic and again presenting the researchers' experience of fandom as those of fandom as a whole.

[7] The final chapters of *Fandom at the Crossroads* discuss *Supernatural*'s in-text assaults on the fourth wall via metatextual episodes and the inclusion in the script of characters playing fans, and the book concludes with much of the same interview material as does *Fangasm*. Much of this material is fascinating and valuable, but again may be better taken more as a discourse to which the cast and crew contribute significant statements than as an unmediated window into their psychology. Some discussion of showrunner Eric Kripke's self-position as fanboy-auteur would have been useful here, especially as this is the more academically oriented of the two books, and readers will likely be approaching it with this framework of knowledge.

[8] The challenge that Larsen and Zubernis set themselves with *Fangasm* and *Crossroads* was a formidable one: to write as academics who are fans and fans who are academics. They sought to explore the experience of fandom from a nonpathologizing psychological perspective while questioning and crossing the artificial barriers that fans and academics set up between themselves and each other. It is hardly surprising that two books were needed under the circumstances. Despite the fact that *Crossroads* has been and will be inevitably pitched toward a more scholarly audience and *Fangasm* toward a fannish one, the books do succeed in some valuable and thought-provoking complications of that division. The discussions of shame and community seeking are an important contribution to the literature. Both books suffer a little from overgeneralization of the researchers' experience; this is more of a problematic issue in *Crossroads* than in *Fangasm*. In *Crossroads*, a more systematic and transparent methodology would amend this. It would also alleviate the concerns noted above regarding the selection of quoted material and ethics of reporting fan discussion in a scholarly context. Nonetheless, it is an important contribution to fan studies literature and would fit well in a master's or advanced undergraduate course, as much for its reflexive authorial positioning as for its topicality. *Fangasm* will certainly be of interest to many fans of *Supernatural*, especially those involved with creative communities and transformative work. It will provide a valuable introduction to some psychological and social theories of fandom, as well as insight into the responsible academic study of fandom.